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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 000107

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UNGA
SUBJECT: CANADIAN FM IN SAUDI ARABIA

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires David Rundell
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Canadian FM Bernier visited Saudi Arabia on January 9-11. Bernier met with various SAG officials, including Saudi King Abdullah. Topics included aid to the Palestinians, Syria/Lebanon, Iran's nuclear ambitions, operations in Afghanistan, UN make-up and commercial interests. This was the first significant bilateral visit between Canada and Saudi Arabia since 2000. The visit was viewed as a success for Canadian-Saudi bilateral relations due to the previously long lull between these two nations.
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Canadian FM Maxine Bernier traveled to Riyadh on January 9 for a one working-day visit. His trip included stops in India and Israel. After the visit, Canadian DCM Yves Duval provided a group readout to 18 different representatives of the diplomatic community in Riyadh.

¶3. (C) Bernier's trip was the first high-level Canadian visit to the kingdom since PM Jean Chretien came in 2000. Canadian-Saudi relations have been cool since 2001 due to a sensitive consular issue. Bernier's visit was an effort to rebuild the bilateral relationship, which appears to have succeeded. The full one-day agenda included meetings with Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Foreign Minister Saud al Faisal, Minister of Petroleum Ali Ibrahim al Naimi, Minister of Commerce and Industry Hashim bin Abdallah bin Hashim Yamani, and Canadian business representatives. Topics included aid to Palestinian territories, Syrian activity in Lebanon, Iran's nuclear ambitions, operations in Afghanistan, comments on the United Nations and expanded bilateral commercial interest.

WARMING RELATIONS

¶4. (C) Bernier's meeting King Abdullah was described by the Canadian DCM as "warm and positive." The King began by expressing regret for having to cancel his June 2001 visit to Canada, which began the Canadian-Saudi bilateral freeze, due to "unpleasant events." This was in reference to a sensitive consular issue dating back to February 2001. In this issue, a Canadian citizen was implicated in the murder of another ex-pat in Saudi Arabia, which allegedly involved the Saudis torturing this Canadian in order to gain his confession. The

issue led to a high volume of negative press in Canada against Saudi Arabia, which resulted in the decline in their bilateral relationship. However, according to the Canadian DCM, the relationship has now improved with the Canadian expectation of King Abdullah visiting Canada in the next 12 months.

PALESTINE/SYRIA/LEBANON

15. (C) In discussions with FM Saud, Bernier confirmed a Canadian contribution of USD 300M to the Paris Conference for Palestinian aid, describing this contribution would help move the peace process forward. Turning toward the Levant, Saud expressed displeasure with Syria's continued meddling in Lebanon. He stated that Syria is a member of the Arab League, and must therefore chose Arab solidarity in regards to Lebanon or to risk isolation.

IRAN

16. (C) Regarding Iran, both FMs concurred Iran needed to abide by the Non-Proliferation Treaty and its obligations to the International Atomic Energy Agency. Saud state Saudi concern over Iran's continued nuclear ambitions and intentions. However, he stressed that dialogue and cooperation were the only way to deal with Iran.

AFGHANISTAN

17. (C) Bernier commented on Canada's participation in Afghanistan. He described Canada's high-tempo military

RIYADH 00000107 002 OF 002

activities in problematic Kandahar province, adding that Canadian casualties were proportionately high given the size of their contingent. Saud stated he had little faith in purely military operations. He offered that the best course of action in Afghanistan is to first stabilize the local Afghan tribes one by one through reconstruction projects (water, education, infrastructure), then build broad national institutions.

UN

18. (C) Saud added a critical commentary of the United Nations. He opined that the UNSC veto was necessary to maintain "Council discipline," but was misused in practice. Why are, he asked rhetorically, resolutions that are discussed and adopted, then vetoed when voted on to be implemented? Saud also added that the Security Council needed to be more representative of the entire General Assembly. Without further elaboration, he quipped that no single nation can truly represent a single bloc of nations.

COMMERCIAL ISSUES

19. (C) In his meeting, with the Minister of Oil, Bernier highlighted that both Canada and Saudi Arabia are energy producers and thus had much in common. It was decided that Cal'E6GQJnSo participate in the International Energy Forum, next scheduled to meet in April 2008. With the Minister of Commerce discussions centered on a possible Free Trade Agreement between Canada and the GCC states. Also, Bernier proposed establishing a Canadian-Saudi Forum focused on business, cultural and political engagement.

FRAKER